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Cold Water Volunteers Their Role in Lake Champlain's Submerged Heritage Programs



The wreck of the Water Witch, lost in Lake Champlain in 1866. Drawing by Kevin Crisman, courtesy of Texas A&M University, the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum, and Vermont Division for Historic Preservation.

The dictionary definition of “volunteer” as “one who offers himself for any service of his own free will” isn’t “satisfying.” A person who works long and hard on an activity and doesn’t get paid for it” better describes the many volunteers who are the backbone of Lake Champlain’s underwater archeology programs. From the beginning steps in 1979 to record and learn about the Lake’s submerged heritage, volunteer sportdivers have provided leadership and labor for surveys and documentation studies. Volunteer sportdivers continue to play key roles in fund raising, advocacy, and education and outreach programs about Lake Champlain’s submerged historic heritage. The Vermont model of volunteer sportdivers as vital components of an underwater archeology program is mirrored in all states that have successful underwater heritage programs.

More so than for land-based archeological sites, volunteers are a vital, integral part of any state’s underwater program. While a state can arguably identify and manage its land archeological sites without volunteers (after all, in many states most sites are privately owned, with individual property owners being stewards of their own sites, if they so choose to be), it would be tough,

and expensive, to identify and manage underwater archeological sites without volunteers. A state program of underwater archeology without volunteers will locate few sites and manage them poorly, if at all.

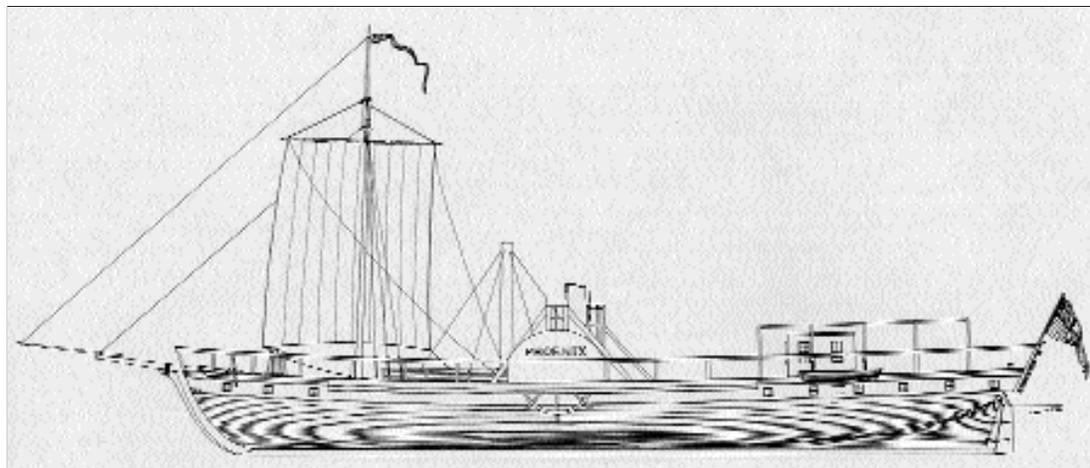
There are key differences between land-based archeological sites and underwater archeological sites that alter the role of, and necessity for, volunteers. First, land sites are easier to find. It doesn’t take a lot of special skills and equipment to locate prehistoric campsites in cornfields or historic cellar holes and mill ruins in pastures and woodlots. It’s a lot harder to find shipwrecks: it takes special equipment, special training, and special effort.

Second, sportdivers have a unique relationship with submerged sites since they can visit and marvel at these resources first hand; most people cannot. There is an unparalleled sense of resource “ownership” among the diving community that bonds divers to each other and to the underwater sites. Sportdivers have the ability—and, if they’ll accept it, the responsibility—to protect and monitor these fragile sites every day, on every dive.

Third, underwater archeological sites are publicly owned; they are not “someone else’s problem.” States are responsible for all the sites that may lie submerged in the public bodies of water

and it’s the state’s responsibility to manage those resources wisely. It’s certainly possible to ignore those resources (and ignore the accompanying problems); but the resources don’t go away. Instead, unmanaged underwater archeological sites simply get abused, and oftentimes destroyed.

Unfortunately, there aren’t a lot of public dollars to go around.



Lake Champlain Transportation Company steamer Phoenix which played the lake for four years until destroyed by fire in 1819. The drawing is based upon archeological measurements of the hull and contemporary plans of similar steamers. Drawing by Kevin Crisman, courtesy of the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation.

In Vermont, as in most states, the underwater archeological programs are run on the proverbial shoestring. Volunteers allow a state to have a successful program and to do projects with a lot less money than it would otherwise. To pay for all the services that volunteer sportdivers contribute to the State of Vermont would be prohibitively expensive—and impossible to do.

Volunteers play many roles in Lake Champlain's underwater archeology programs. They discover sites, help to survey and record sites, get the word out about the importance and specialness of the sites (education and outreach), monitor sites, help manage sites, fund raise, and advocate for the sites.

Although discovering a shipwreck doesn't turn a diver into a volunteer, reporting that discovery is often a diver's first volunteer action. Sportdivers have played a unique role in locating many of Lake Champlain's most important discoveries. Lorenzo Hagglund found (and later raised) *Philadelphia* in 1935; more recently, divers discovered and reported *General Butler* (the first sailing canal boat discovered in Lake Champlain), *Phoenix* (one of America's earliest steamboats), and *Horseferry* (the only known horse-powered shipwreck in America), among a few examples. As is the case with land-based sites, the discovery of a site often fuels volunteerism in underwater archeology. Sometimes what begins as a random search for neat things to look at becomes a burning interest to learn more about a site. However it happens, that first contact with a piece of history positively motivates many of Lake Champlain's sportdiver volunteers.

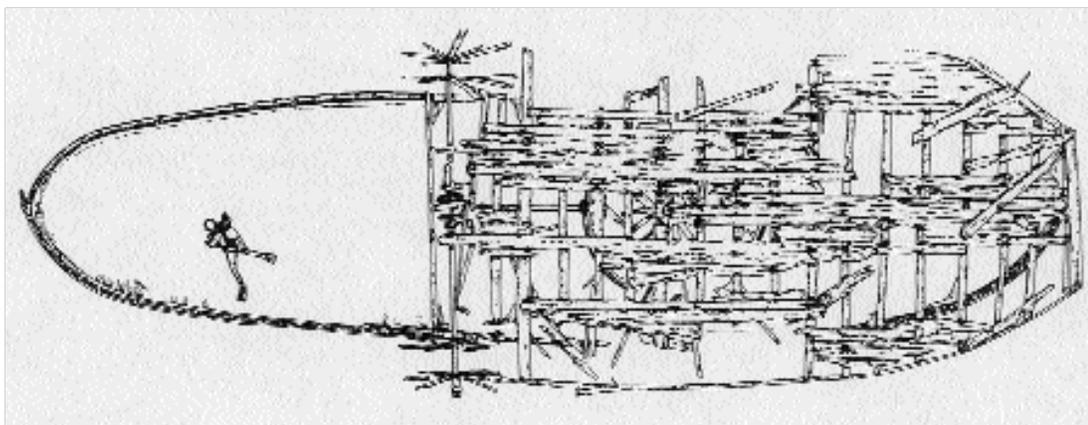
While accidental site discovery can be a "low cost" activity (except for the diver's time and equipment), there is nothing low cost about underwater archeological surveys and documentation studies. Rental or purchase of side-scan sonar and other remote sensing equipment, a dive boat and gas, diving equipment, compressed air, recording supplies and equipment, and a big enough support team is a costly operation. In

Lake Champlain, numerous surveys and historic shipwreck recording projects have been successfully completed with the support of many divers who generously donated time, expertise, and equipment. Fred Fayette often generously donated his large boat and captain's services for survey projects. In 1980, long before the Abandoned Shipwreck Act of 1987 and its subsequent 1990 Guidelines promoted volunteerism, a team of volunteers under the auspices of the Champlain Maritime Society recorded *Phoenix*, one of America's earliest steamboats built in 1815.¹ In 1981 and 1982, volunteers also with the Champlain Maritime Society documented *General Butler*, a remarkably intact sailing canal boat that sank in 1876 during a wild winter gale.^{2, 3} Additional recording projects were undertaken by Champlain Maritime Society volunteers on the War of 1812 wrecks in the Poultney River, on the Isle La Motte marble schooner, and *Horseferry* between 1982 and 1986.⁴ While the State of Vermont, with National Park Service funding, was able to pay for parts of these studies, most of the field efforts were accomplished by volunteers.⁵ More recently, federal and state funded documentation and data recovery projects off Mount Independence/Fort Ticonderoga, on *Champlain*, *Water Witch*, and at other sites benefited from a core group of support volunteers with super diving capabilities and ever-improving underwater archeological skills.

Volunteers are now playing an indispensable role in helping the State of Vermont manage its Underwater Historic Preserve program, soon to celebrate its 10th anniversary.⁶ Since January 1993, a citizen group of activist sportdivers, representing dive clubs, dive shops, dive charters, the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum, and the Burlington, Vermont Harbormaster, meet monthly on their own time and dollar to set goals and direction for the five Preserve sites. The Vermont Underwater Historic Preserve Advisory Committee provides the state a focused vision about the future of the Preserves, technical advice about site

maintenance and management, brainstorming for a broad range of problems, educational and outreach support, fund raising, and a network of volunteers. This volunteer group is an invaluable asset offering ideas, energy, and support to a poorly funded, unstaffed state pro-

The wreck of the *Horseferry*. This drawing was traced from a photomosaic prepared from dozens of overlapping photographs. The forward end of the boat (left) has lost its deck. The large, horizontal wheel that propelled the side-wheels is visible beneath the fragmented deck. Photomosaic by Scott Hill Milton Shares and Dennis Floss. Drawing by Kevin Crisman, courtesy of the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation.



gram that was floundering until the Advisory Committee stepped in.

Many volunteers help on an independent, ad hoc basis and participate when they can. One such individual has spent over 40 years doing exhaustive archival research in his spare time in Lake Champlain Basin newspapers and other regional archives in North America and abroad to record all ships that once traveled, and may have been lost, in the lake. Several sportdivers are devoted to small, interior upland lakes where they have discovered and recorded rare Native American dugout canoes. Some volunteers organize other volunteers. And usually, a great program of volunteers requires great volunteer leaders. In 1979, Arthur Cohn helped organize the Champlain Maritime Society, a non-profit organization that sponsored many successful volunteer projects between 1980 and 1986. In 1984, he and Robert Beach Jr. organized the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum. Founded by volunteers and continuing to thrive on volunteers, the Museum operates as a tremendously successful non-profit organization that each summer leverages hundreds of volunteer hours into one of the most productive educational and outreach programs in northern New England. The Museum's newsletter is the best I've ever seen.

On the New York side of Lake Champlain, Joseph Zarzynski's enthusiasm for history and diving coalesced into Bateaux Below, Inc., a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving and interpreting the history and nautical archeology of Lake George.^{7, 8} With little governmental support, Bateaux Below, Inc. discovered a remarkable assortment of Revolutionary War wrecks in this small northern lake, including *Land Tootoise*, North America's oldest intact warship. This initial work was followed by documentation projects and National Register nominations. Bateaux Below Inc. successfully advocated for the creation of Submerged Historic Preserve sites in Lake George, modeled after Vermont's program. The rich submerged history of Lake George would have remained unknown and untold without this band of persistent and devoted volunteers.

Dive clubs play an important role in protecting and managing submerged resources. They educate club members as well as the general public, provide a pool of knowledgeable volunteers, and advocate to legislators and government administrators for more money and more attention to the sites. The Lake Champlain Reef Runners hold a yearly fund-raising and outreach day for Vermont's Underwater Historic Preserves. Club members provide monitoring support for the Preserve sites on hectic summer weekends. Club officers and members devotedly and enthusiastically participate in

the monthly meeting of the Preserve Advisory Committee.

The huge support provided by volunteers in Lake Champlain's—and Lake George's—underwater heritage programs can't be easily measured. Suffice to say that it's worth a great deal. Far beyond the dollar value of their contributions, Lake Champlain's sportdiving volunteers accomplish something that can't ever be bought or paid for: they protect our fragile and extraordinary underwater sites by deeply caring about them. This State Archeologist is deeply indebted to these volunteers.

Notes

- ¹ Champlain Maritime Society. *The Phoenix Project*. Burlington, Vermont: Champlain Maritime Society, 1981.
- ² Champlain Maritime Society. *A Report on the Nautical Archaeology of Lake Champlain: Results of the 1983 Field Season of the Champlain Maritime Society*. Edited by R. Montgomery Eischer. Burlington, Vermont: Champlain Maritime Society, 1985.
- ³ Cohn, Arthur and Marshall True. "The Wreck of the GENERAL BUTLER and the Mystery of Lake Champlain's Sailing Canal Boats." *Vermont History*. Vol. 60, No. 1, 1992.
- ⁴ Champlain Maritime Society. *A Report on the Nautical Archaeology of Lake Champlain: Results of the 1982 Field Season of the Champlain Maritime Society*. Edited by Arthur B. Cohn. Burlington, Vermont: Champlain Maritime Society, 1984.
- ⁵ Peebles, Giovanna. "The Management of Vermont's Underwater Resources: A Model of Shared Responsibility" *Proceedings of the Sixteenth Conference on Underwater Archaeology*. Edited by Paul Forsythe Johnston. Special Publication Series. No. 4. Society for Historical Archaeology, 1985.
- ⁶ Peebles, Giovanna and David Skinas. "Vermont's Underwater Historic Preserves: Challenges, Benefits, Problems, and Process." *Underwater Archaeology Proceedings From the Society for Historical Archaeology Conference*. Edited by J. Barto Arnold. Society for Historical Archaeology, 1989.
- ⁷ Zarzynski, Joseph W. "Empire State Shipwrecks and Hulks with National Register of Historic Places Status." *The Lake George Nautical Newsletter* Wilton, NY: Bateaux Below, Vol. 1, No. 4, December 1992.
- ⁸ Zarzynski, Joseph W. "Preserving Eighteenth Century Shipwrecks at Lake George, New York, USA, Through Underwater Archaeology, Shipwreck Preserves, and Museum Exhibits." *Bermuda Journal of Archaeology and Maritime History*, Vol. 5, 1993.

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